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THE MID-WINTER HARVEST OF PLAYS

BY HENRY McDONALD SPENCER

THE question, "Is marriage a failure?" is hardly valid until it has been shown that Life as a whole is a success; or, in other words: "Is marriage more of a failure than single life"—so called? The stumbling-block to extra-matrimonial alliances is this: That when the novelty wears off and they become an accepted *modus vivendi* they are just as flat, stale and unprofitable as the regular union, even without the handicap of social ostracism. And even if single men and their wives were not subject to this handicap, the same causes of friction and inevitable disagreements would exist in their case as in that of the regularly joined.

It may be granted that marriage is merely a tribal custom and that the mediæval incantation mumbled by the priest neither can sanctify the mating nor insure its happiness, yet where its antagonists grow thin is in the assumption that any great change in human character would result from free union. Marriage is not sacred, it was not even a sacrament of the church until the twelfth century, but, regarded as a mere working arrangement, have we found a successful substitute? If Jack and Jill omitted the ceremony would they be any more civil to each other, and would Jack be any better off with Ann? Leaving aside gypsies, artists (including writers) and members of the social Bolshevik impatient of all restraint, there would appear to be no great demand for a radical change in marriage customs, nor would a multiplicity of wives, either abreast or tandem, appeal to the average American.

One of our great delusions in regard to sex matters is that while in theory we are

all monogamists, yet in private we practise polygamy. Nothing is further from the truth. This delusion arises from a picture which man paints of himself, to wit, that he is "a devil of a fellow among the women", a virtuoso of philandering, whereas ninety-nine men out of every hundred lack the energy, ambition, time, patience, money, inventiveness, dissimulation, and courage necessary for a double life, to say nothing of a triple or beyond.

And so we come to the reaction of the Danish playwright, Hjalmar Bergstrom, to the institution of "holy matrimony," and we are indebted to the Greenwich Village Theatre for a most distinguished and adequate presentation of his *Karen*. To be sure, the author is too subtle to adopt the Brioux method of imposing his doctrine on the public—the play is a good play as a rendering of human experience through the medium of the dramaturgic art—but the bright, attractive characters are all in revolt against the convention, and the narrow, stodgy, unjust preacher is, of course, strong for the traditional method of joining. Furthermore, the tag, from Karen's lips, that the birth of all things is accompanied by pain, would indicate that either Bergstrom is prophesying a change in marriage customs, or else, that he thought the line too good to omit.

As a fact the two affairs of the sprightly heroine turned out rather badly, but that did not deter the young lady from arguing heatedly with her father as to the wisdom of amending some of our social customs. The principal point made was against the high cost of matrimony which keeps so many persons single long after nature has

indicated that they are quite equipped physically for the adventure. Perhaps one of the most interesting things about the play is the fact that it was interdicted by the Danish censor in 1907, and yet it does not impress the average theatre-goer in New York to-day as being particularly pornographic or that it is a play to which a young man should not take his grandmother.

In the eponymous part Miss Marinoff's acting leaves nothing to be desired, and she rose to the "big scenes" with ease and a sense of reserve power. In fact it is not the least of the merits of this admirable organization that all of the members of the Greenwich Village Theatre Company convey the impression of holding something up their sleeve. As the professor of theology, Mr. Conroy was better fitted than in the Schnitzler play of the last series, and gave a well-rounded interpretation of a strong rôle. Miss Grace Henderson also rose to the occasion and handled the "unexpectedness" of her character with taste and discretion.

Coming now to another Apostle of Revolt, Mr. Hartley Manners, the author of *Happiness*, tells us in a signed article in *The New York Times* that he declines "to be hampered by either tradition or convention." Quite so, Mr. Manners, and incidentally you show your contempt for convention and the rules of good English by splitting an infinitive more widely than I ever have seen it split elsewhere: "To *carefully and methodically* build, etc.," is a supreme example of bad writing.

Mr. Manners's revolt, however, consists in writing a play which is not a play, and it is in the form, not in the substance, that he allows his wild and untrammelled spirit to take liberties with the accepted methods. His thesis is as tame and trite as a copy-book head-line—and is equally untrue. He does not believe in the play of

situation, but in the development of character, as if character was not best shown in its reaction to situation. The play is written around the assumption that work creates happiness and that the possession of money and leisure leads to the reverse. Obviously this is sheer piffle. People are not happy because of work, but in spite of it—were it otherwise this world would be an Elysian field—as most of us work. Be good and you'll be happy, is a profound discovery compared to Mr Manners's theme. The converse, that riches breed discontent is equally absurd. They do not. Wealth may not produce happiness, but it brings a fair substitute, namely, comfort. It would be well if Mr. Manners read his Bible—a revolutionary pamphlet—and hearkened to the words of the Saviour to the effect that the kingdom of heaven is within.

The working out of the non-play is equally apart from the experience of life. A milliner's apprentice, Miss Laurette Taylor, delivers a costume to a rich and discontented woman and so impresses her that the mollusk decides forthwith to adopt some form of uplift work as a remedy for her unhappiness; also a tepid young gentleman decides to go into the lumber business as a result of the cheery humming of Miss Taylor. Nothing ever happens and eleven o'clock finds Miss Taylor presiding over a well-stocked nursery. The "situations" evidently occur behind the scenes, or between the acts. It is only through the influence of the blithe young spirits of revolt that the world is saved from the sclerotic condition of academic formalism, but until a revolutionary can show us something better than the old stuff we must be pardoned if we look askance at his particular brand of reform. But he must show us and not merely tell us. We do not discharge the old family doctor and take on a new man until the latter at least has

demonstrated that he knows something about anatomy, even if we suspect that the former is very much of an old fossil.

In *Yes or No* Mr. Arthur Goodrich makes another attempt to prove that something different is better, and again his insurgency affects only the form and not the substance. The introduction of the movie technique, as first exhibited in *On Trial*, is here elaborated, and in addition to the "cut-back" we have the introduction of two scenes with alternating action. This is accomplished by the device of two separate sets on the stage at once, and by the alternate lighting and darkening of each, we are transported from one room to another. The audience seemed to accept the novel convention well enough, but after all it is a mere piece of stage carpentry plus lights, and the soul of the play is the old melodramatic heroine's oft caricatured response, that "rags are royal raiment when worn for virtue's sake." At least the poor, young wife who says "no" to the tempter, when he offers her clothes and luxury, lives happily with her husband, who ultimately is prosperous; while the idle, rich woman who succumbs, eventually fills the rôle of perpetual aunt to the children of the good lady. Miss Willette Kershaw plays the rich woman, and Emilie Polini the poor wife.

The lighter side of life is shown in two English war plays, *General Post*, by Harold Terry, and *Billeted*, by F. Tennyson Jesse and H. M. Harwood. They are both amusing and replete with the situations which Mr. Manners condemns. Incidentally each provides an entertaining evening.

In *General Post*, a Shavian situation develops and a Nietzschean tailor attracts the regard of a modern young lady of the Ann Veronica type as portrayed by H. G. Wells when he was writing good fiction, instead of bad theology. Mr. Terry did

not have the courage of his characters, however, and instead of having the tailor reject the high-born young lady on the ground that England needed him and that he had no time for philandering, he used the weak argument that he thought she would not be happy with a man so far beneath her in station. The war, of course, changes his position and he comes back a hero on the road to a title. William Courtenay is successful as the tailor man, but Wise makes the baronet a rollicking sort of Dickens character, rather than an up-stage aristocrat.

Billeted is particularly interesting as showing Miss Anglin in a light-comedy rôle, which she handles skilfully and with genuine feminine attraction. It is a pity that she does not play this kind of part more often and wait to take up Greek tragedy until a later, and, perhaps, alas, a heavier day.

Two notable revivals are also among the month's offerings. *Lord and Lady Alby* is hardly worth the efforts of William Faversham, Maxine Elliott, and Maclyn Arbuckle. The play is curiously *demodée*, and the planting of the photograph with its opportune, or inopportune discovery, fairly reeks of grease-paint. Similarly Ethel Barrymore, Rose Coghlan, Conway Tearle, and Holbrook Blinn might have been better employed than in a revamped version of the original vampire play, *The Lady of the Camellias*. Vamping is not Miss Barrymore's forte.

It is, perhaps, somewhat futile to review a review, but *The Cohan Revue* 1918 lacks nothing of the Cohan punch. The caricaturing of Leo Ditrichstein by Charles Wininger suggests the possibility of a No. 2 company in *The King*, and the part of Belasco as played by Charles Dow Clark was a faithful presentation of one of the most picturesque, if reactionary, of our stage Emperors.